

A LETTER

ADDRESSED

TO THE GOVERNMENT,

AND

THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS,

FOUNDED ON THE

DIABOLICAL AND HORRIBLE PRACTICE OF BURKING;

SETTING FORTH THE NECESSITY OF

PLACING ANATOMICAL SCHOOLS ON A DIFFERENT FOOTING:

TO WHICH IS SUBMITTED,

A PLAN FOR EFFECTING THE SAME.

London, November 30, 1831.

SIRS,

It has often been observed, that in all ages and in all countries, there have been men base and wicked enough to resort, for the obtainment of money to the most abandoned and wicked acts; it is possible for our natures to be guilty of. The horrid and atrocious murder which took place in Edinburgh has too well confirmed the truth of that observation. This novel species of crime doubtlessly brought us up to the very acme of human wickedness; for we should hope there can be nothing else left to surpass it in enormity. The temptation is said to be attributable to the defective state of our anatomical schools, both as regards the law and their management. The case of Burke has formed an example one would have imagined never would have been set, and much more followed. We may date it as the commencement of a new era in the records of human depravity, which must be acknowledged, ought to have been immediately terminated by the most effectual interference, either of the Legislature, or of the College of Surgeons, or of both; and it would surely be the best law or regula-

Bishop remarked, that he never thought of murder till he heard of the case of Burke, though he had been a resurrectionist previous to that event.

tion, which could at once destroy the motives* to commit a particular act, than any that could be devised, for the conviction and the punishment of an offender.

A preventive course, I shall endeavour to shew could have been adopted, if the College of Surgeons had taken it partly under their own cognizance; and not have left it wholly to the legislature, which could not be expected to give very effectual relief, when the subject proved to be too unpopular a one, to admit even of a free public discussion. That part which related to the mode of supplying the schools, is a matter no government could give much assistance in, but benefit could be derived by repealing the existing law, which renders it illegal to possess a dead body for the purpose of dissection, and to have passed an act licensing, limiting, and regulating the anatomical schools in great Britain; having principally for its object the prevention of a repetition of that crime, we blush to think originated in our country, and which appears to be sanctioned, because not prevented by some efficient measures which would deprive the murderer of the power of disposing of his victim, and obtaining the large sum of ten fifteen or twenty pounds, he calculates upon receiving. From what has been discovered, very strong suspicions have been formed of "Burking," having existed long previous to the detection of Burke.

More particularly lately it has been advanced, similar practices, to a very great extent, must have been carried on, for the number of schools which have been opened so many years in the metropolis, have ever laboured under the same uncertainty and difficulty of being supplied with bodies as at the present period, the same high prices were given, and moreover greater carelessness, owing to no suspicion, for anatomists were not then on their guard, never suspecting up to the Edinburgh affair, any human being would be guilty of an act of murder for the value of a body, and hence it is conjectured, people frequently must have been admitted into the dissecting rooms purposely assassinated by some desperate Villains, also the impossibility in many deaths of discovering the cause

* No "Burking" in Ireland or Paris, subjects being plentiful, and of little value

was the same then as at present, with this difference, in favour of non-discovery, no one thought of seeking by what means death had been produced, anatomists occasionally searched for disorganized structures to serve the purposes of a lecture on morbid anatomy. It is not possible by the most careful researches in all cases to discover what produced death; the want of this knowledge has induced many people, unacquainted with anatomy and surgery, to form a very mean opinion of the art, nor is it possible at all times to discover, whether or no, a body has been disinterred. In diseases of children and old people *post mortem* examinations often end unsatisfactorily and inconclusive; in cases of death, by tetanus, serous appoplexy, or hæmorrhage, and certain spasmodic diseases. I dissected a man some time ago a carpenter by trade, a nail pricked the sole of his foot, it healed, and there was no appearance of any wound, in a few days he was seized with convulsive symptoms about the throat, and died: eleven Surgeons were present, and no discovery of alteration in the structure of any part could be found; therefore, as long as death cannot be detected in every case, trusting to that uncertainty alone, would be no protection or defence against "Burking."

These suspicions tend to shew more forcibly, the imperative necessity of placing the schools under such regulations for their management, as will be a security to the public. For, it is dreadful to think, one shudders at the very thought, that the daily poverty and wretchedness of some of our fellow creatures* should have no respite in the repose of sleep. All the science of Anatomy and Surgery is nothing in consideration with those watchful, anxious, feelings of insecurity of the parentless, the friendless, the forsaken, and the stranger within our gates, these horrors occasionally recurring, so connect anatomists and surgeons with the subject, as to give to that portion of the public who are not very nice in discriminating, an unfavourable opinion of their feeling and humanity.

It may be thought an aggravation of what has been proved to have taken place, to suppose it has been carried on to any great extent. It ought to be quite enough, if only one affair of the kind has happened to induce every thing to be adopted, that would for

* The poor and housless often seek rest in the open air, on brick kilns, &c.

ever prevent a similar offence. I cannot bring my mind to suppose burking is carried to that pitch which is supposed; some have asserted, not a single week passes without the introduction of murdered bodies into our dissecting rooms, the fact of one case having been proved, there is less occasion for enforcing this argument, upon mere supposition, we do hope things are not so bad, but it is admitted, they are bad enough to require some effectual interposition, for as I have before stated the fact of only one individual being destroyed ought to be convincing proof of the necessity of putting a check on the seller, as well as the purchaser, if this had been done in the first instance, we should have heard no more of burking, and those victims who have since fallen a sacrifice, would have been saved, and the poor and wretched and houseless spared, their painful feelings of insecurity, and the want of confidence in those, their cruel fate has compelled them to associate with, and also the outrage inflicted on the public feelings.

When the anatomical bill was introduced, anatomists and surgeons knew very little could be expected, as to government interfering with the mode of supplying the schools, and they were very much afraid some very severe act would pass, making the buyer and seller answerable to the law, by the highest penalties short of death, that could be inflicted; without any other relief no doubt such an act would have met with the approbation of the public, but it would have been at the risk of closing all the schools of anatomy in great Britain, and obliging students either to go to Dublin or to Paris.

As no assistance could be given, as to the supply by disposing or appointing any class or classes of his majesty's subjects, or even by the more chimerical mode of importation, as the government found it could not interfere, on that point it left the law as to buying and selling alone, an indulgence the science of anatomy acknowledged, but which unfortunately has not prevented the crime which was thought the principal object of the bill to prevent.

It is and ever has been so unpopular a subject, that not much ought to be expected of the government; with this idea, I submit some plans and I am not aware any better have been proposed,

possessing the all important advantage of altogether putting a stop to Burking, and whilst subjects are obtained, no class of individuals are (without the sanction of the relatives or connexions) appropriated to the purposes of anatomy.* It is the opinion of many, this is an affair which ought to devolve on the college of surgeons as much as possible, and the country spared the investigation of a subject, which will not admit of much relief, without attaching some odium or other, which the government should be relieved of, if any thing can be done without its assistance.

The plan, I now suggest, is the very same I contemplated at the time of the trial of Burke, but thinking that affair was one, which would have stood alone in the annals of crime, I did not think it necessary to make it public, but what has so recently transpired, has actuated me to lay before you, whatever has suggested itself, as at all likely to prevent in future the sacrifice of a fellow creature. The first and most important measure I conceive is, to ascertain what schools of anatomy and surgery exist in the kingdom, and for government to do, as was done, for correcting the abuses in public and private madhouses.

I. In order that the schools of anatomy and surgery may be brought under better management and control, that they be licenscd.

II. That the Schools be limited in their numbers, the benefit here will be very great, for, instead of having many small private schools (oftentimes more frequently set up to bring juniors in the profession into notoriety, and to gain a little emolument at the same time), half-a-dozen would be enough, and by their being well attended, more instruction would be derived from a few subjects, and the minor schools would not stand in the way of the supply of the larger, as at present.

III. No one to open, or to have any School, Lecture, or Dissecting-rooms not licenscd, for the purpose of teaching or instructing in any science or art requiring the human body for demonstration or illustration; in case of detection, prosecution with certain penalties upon conviction.

* An Association to be formed, similar to Dr. Macartney's of Dublin, for the Profession to enroll themselves for dissection.

IV. To repeal the Act which renders it illegal to possess a dead body for the purposes of dissection, and to do away with that latter part of the sentence of condemned criminals, which relates to dissection.

V. For Government to appoint an Office, to be called "An Office for the Administration of Public Institutions," and to appoint an Officer, to be named "Commissioner of Public Institutions," he to be provided with two Assistants, to be termed "Anatomical Inspectors."

VI. To pass an Act, punishing with transportation, for a term of years, any person or persons detected without the authority of the Commissioner, in having sold, or selling, any human body or bodies.

The above-mentioned six Articles are all which should be expected of Government, leaving every thing else to be managed under the authority of the Royal College of Surgeons; and we now come to the manner in which the schools are to be supplied; and it is by all unclaimed bodies, and those voluntary given up by their friends;* and since the smaller schools are to be thrown into a few larger ones, so great a supply will not be required; but if this mode does not yield a sufficient number, the plan I propose under the head of Economy be sanctioned by the College of Surgeons. The Commissioner and his Anatomical Inspectors to have the following duties to perform.

First, to superintend certain books, at the Office for Administration of Public Institutions, keeping a correct registry of all persons admitted, dying and discharged, and another book for regulating the anatomical schools, to prevent any one of them being served out of fair and equal rotation.

Secondly, The Commissioner to see the Porter of all Institutions register the names of all persons admitted; taking down their address, their nearest relative or friend, and the property

* Independent of Public Institutions, more bodies are privately disposed of than is generally supposed; and it would happen more frequently, if persons knew *where to apply*, and knew the Service for the Dead would be properly conducted; and after a body had served the purposes of scientific research, the Commissioner assured the parties, his Inspector would see the remains collected, and properly consigned to the earth.

they possess about them ; and the Inspectors to bring these reports twice a week to the Office, to be entered in the book kept for that purpose.

Thirdly, In case of death taking place in any of the Institutions, notice is immediately to be sent to the Office, and the Commissioner is to refer to his registry ; and if it has not been entered, send the Inspector to the Porter of that Institution for the registry ; and then the Commissioner is to apprise the nearest relatives or friends of the demise of the deceased, and to inform them they must attend at a certain day to be present at the church-service for the dead ;† after that has taken place, the property of the deceased is to be handed over to the claimants, and they are to be informed, if they claim the body, the funeral must be conducted at their own expense in a decent and respectable manner. If the body is voluntarily given up, the Commissioner is to assure the parties that after the body has served the purpose of scientific research, that his Inspector will see the remains are collected, and decently and properly interred in certain grounds attached to all the licensed schools.

Fourthly, All unclaimed bodies the Commissioner is to see the service for the dead is properly conducted ; and the body, after serving the purpose of scientific research, be interred, as stated above.

Fifthly, Immediately the Commissioner is apprised a body is unclaimed, or given up, to send his Inspector to review the deceased, and take down in his note-book the following particulars ;— the disease of which the patient died (if it is ascertained or conjectured) ; the name, age, sex, colour of the hair ; the number of teeth, and the state of them ; the height and condition ; if marked with the small-pox, or any mark or marks on any part of the body, or any peculiarities about the eyes, ears, face, feet, toes, hands, or fingers, or any deformity, &c. &c.

* The Burial Service, performed without actual interment, is not more incomplete than the burials conducted at St. Mary-le-bone Church ;—there the coffin descends through the floor into a vault, and is not committed to the earth. The service applies equally as well without burial, as with excepting a very short form of prayer ~~was~~^{at} the conclusion.

Sixthly, The Inspector having passed his review, the Commissioner gives an order for the body to be removed to the place assigned, and the note-book is to be shown to the Anatomist or Demonstrator, who receives the body, to see if it conforms with the description, and if it does, to put his signature, acknowledging the receipt, with the date, &c. The Inspector then takes his note-book to the Commissioner, who enters the destination of such and such a body, in his book, kept for the purpose of reference, to ascertain what school stands next in rotation.

Seventhly, No bodies to be admitted into any school which have not been reviewed by the Inspectors, &c., not even those subjects obtained independent of public establishments, by parties disposing of themselves or friends privately, and no part of a body or bodies be permitted to enter with or without the permission of the Commissioner.

Eighthly, The Commissioner and Inspectors to have free ingress, egress, and regress, at all hours, into the Anatomical and Surgical Lecture and Dissecting-rooms.

Ninthly, The Commissioner or Inspectors be empowered to seize all bodies which they recognise not having passed through their review, and the head or proprietor of that school or schools be obliged to render an account how, and from whom such body or bodies have been obtained, in pain of having their license taken away from them.

Tenthly, The Royal College of Surgeons pass a by-law, not acknowledging for one or more Courses the certificates given by those Instructors in Anatomy to their Pupils, who have been represented by the Commissioner as having admitted and dissected a body not having passed the review of the Inspector. So important to Students are those Certificates, when they present themselves for examination at the College, that the Students themselves would oppose the clandestine introduction of a subject, and render every facility to the Inspectors for discovery.

I now come to that measure I have before hinted at, and have placed under the head of the Economy of Subjects. Those who have passed through the various Schools of Anatomy in the United Kingdom

have often observed the great carelessness and waste of Subjects by the negligence of Students, and from many of them not being sufficiently advanced in the science of anatomy, as to be capable of deriving the greatest possible instruction a subject will admit of.

It is required of all Students of Anatomy and Surgery who present themselves for Examination, that they should produce certificates of having attended three Winter Courses of Anatomical Lectures, and one of Surgery. Now, by throwing the Schools as much as possible together, greater numbers of Students will be collected in one place, and a subject will afford as much instruction to 250 Students as to 25, in a spacious-built and well-lighted Lecture room.* This would cause a great saving of subjects, and be one way of economising them. For the other, I propose the establishing of a school by which would save 150 subjects (and I am well acquainted with parties residing in Paris whom I have spoken to upon this matter), for the teaching of the first principles of Anatomy by wax models and dried preparations; as it is also required by the College of Surgeons for Candidates for their Diplomas to produce Certificates of having performed two WINTER COURSES OF DISSECTIONS, beside those mentioned above. I propose, one only of these Courses be required by the College, and as a substitute for the other, the College pass a by-law, receiving in lieu of the other Course of Dissections Certificates of having attended a Six Months' Course of Instruction, to be derived from the models before mentioned. The school which, with your permission, I would undertake the establishing, should be supplied:—1st. With all the scientific preparations, (humid and dry), necessary for the teaching of osteology, the capsules and ligaments, and cartilages of the joints, and their articulations.—

. The school should be well supplied with the very best drawings and plates which have been produced, with full descriptions in the English language. — 3. The very best anatomical and surgical models in wax), the Parisian artists can produce not only those inimitable productions, but also those of various diseases,) which

* A Lecture Room should have the light thrown from above on the operating table; and the room should be like a horse shoe, in figure only more circular.

shall be abundantly supplied, and arranged in such a manner as to be accessible to the Students at all times.* It is almost inconceivable to those who have not seen these wax anatomical representations, how beautifully and correctly layers or classes of the muscles are displayed, in the various stages in which the anatomical dissection has proceeded, in the different figures:—as the dissection is supposed to proceed, the larger nerves and blood-vessels rise into view, and the correctness of the brain, the viscera of the chest and abdomen and pelvis cannot be better represented in the real body. The art of modelling in wax in former times is not to be compared with modern Parisian productions, any persons who have seen those figures in Dublin, must at once observe their clumsiness, and admire the perfection to which the moderns have brought the art up to. I take to myself no originality in this mode of teaching, because it is ancient, and used at some continental schools, particularly at Leyden. In the summer I went to see some of the private collections in Paris, of Mons. * * * in the Rue Montesquieu, and Rue Vivien, and the public collection at the Garden de Plants, and at the Ecole de Médecine, and from what I saw, and from the conversation I had with some of the Proprietors, (who are surgeons,) we agreed an immensity is to be learnt from wax anatomical representations,† and really when a person is deceived at two paces distance, when a portion of a fresh subject is dissected and placed at the side of a wax model, surely this art may be converted into a useful source of anatomical instruction.

I do not mean to say anatomy is to be acquired or learnt solely in this way,‡ it is to have for its object the familiarising the eye of students with the different parts of the human frame, and combined with their three winter courses of lectures to prepare them for their last six months winter dissection, and to enable them to gain the most instruction of a subject; many have said that dissection is not only to teach the anatomy of parts, but by the cutting to instruct

* By this mode, summer instruction can be given.

† Mons. Everard placed the thigh and knee of a fresh subject, dissected, next a wax model, and at two yards distance; three surgeons out of four, were deceived.

‡ The anatomy of the eye and ear can be taught without the human body.

the hand, and to give it a certain firmness, and a knowledge of what force an incision should be made, and to perceive according to the state of the knife, what it is capable of performing; for this matter, the dissection of the inferior animals might answer the same purpose.

If three winter courses of anatomy and one course of instruction from anatomical wax models, &c., &c., and then a six months course of dissection does not sufficiently instruct a student in anatomy, I should be inclined to think, there must be some negligence on his part, or some very great inaptitude for instruction of any kind; taking the profession of medicine generally, it must have been observed how few there are, whose practice in after life, leads them to operative surgery, so far I am certain, the necessity of very minute anatomical information, is very much overrated; we will suppose a man intends to be what is called a general practitioner, in town or country, if an accident occurs to a poor man, and a general practitioner is sent for, the person is immediately sent; if it takes place in a town to the hospital, if it occurs in the country the person is sent to the county infirmary. If it occurs to a rich man, and it is an accident of very great importance, requiring amputation, a first rate operative surgeon is sent for, the only accident requiring immediate surgical assistance, are those of Hæmorrhage from some artery or vessel being wounded, and in this case, all the anatomy necessary for the general practitioner, is to know how and where to apply a Tourniquet or some sort of bandage to stop the Bleeding, till the patient is removed to an Hospital, or an operative surgeon is sent for. If a student intends to practice as an operative surgeon, his knowledge of anatomy cannot be too perfect, and if a student finds the London schools, do not furnish a sufficient number of subjects, why not do as myself, and others have done, namely go to DUBLIN or Paris? Where the science can be followed up with every facility, and at a very moderate expense, indeed rather than the system inducing Burking should be left as it is, or the discussion of anatomical matters, be constantly brought before the public, it would be better for the Royal College of Surgeons, to pass a by-law, making it obligatory for all students to spend six months at the DUBLIN schools in dissecting, this would not only afford instruction but much enhance the respectability of the profession and it would be doing only what is necessary, for the completion of the edu-